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ABSTRACT

Correctional education is a generic term describing a wide range of educational activities that take place in institutional and community settings. In 1986, 37 states and the District of Columbia provided correctional education to incarcerated adults directly through state departments of corrections. In addition, several states have created alternative administrative structures to address problems associated with traditional delivery of correctional education such as lack of funding, community resources, coordination with and support from other state agencies, adequately trained staff, and coordination with other educational institutions. During the past 15 years, extensive litigation in the U.S. correctional system has affected correctional education. This is particularly true in the areas of inmates' rights to education and parity for female offenders. Although the prevalence of handicaps among incarcerated juvenile offenders has been studied extensively, little research has been done in the area of the extent of learning disabilities among adult offenders. Although it is a new area, a program combining special educational with appropriate transitional and aftercare services in the context of complex multiagency planning and service delivery gives evidence of substantially reducing habitual patterns of criminal behavior. Because it teaches skills that inmates can use to gain employment after release, vocational education is also important in reducing recidivism. Another new and promising area of service delivery is that of postsecondary correctional education. (MN)

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OVERVIEW

ERIC® DIGEST NO.58

Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

CORRECTIONAL EDUCATION: SELECTED ASPECTS

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Correctional education is a generic term describing a wide range of educational activities that take place in institutional and community correctional settings. Education has been linked with prisons since the Walnut Street Jail opened in Philadelphia around 1790. Correctional educators are the largest noncustodial employee group in United States prisons, providing services to a population made up largely of unskilled and undereducated adults. This *Overview* provides an introduction to correctional education through a discussion of the following aspects: trends in administration, equity and legal issues, the learning handicapped adult offender, vocational education, and postsecondary education.

Current Administrative Trends

In 1986, 37 states and the District of Columbia provide correctional education to incarcerated adults directly through state departments of corrections (DOC). Although the DOC has been the traditional provider of correctional education, there are some problems associated with this model. These include lack of funding and difficult access to funding; low priority within state corrections; isolation from and lack of access to community resources, such as colleges and universities and the private sector; lack of coordination with and support from other state agencies; inadequately trained and certified staff; lack of holistic, systemwide, and comprehensive programs; inadequate number of programs and program slots; inadequate and outmoded equipment and materials; inadequate space; and inadequate coordination among academic education, vocational training, institutional maintenance, and prison industry.

In order to address the problems associated with the traditional delivery of correctional education, several states have created alternative administrative structures. The most popular of these is the special school district for corrections, a model used in nine states. The most frequently identified advantages of the school district model are as follows: increased funding, better qualified staff, quality programs, and higher status for correctional education within the correctional system. Despite the fact that the school district model may have the greatest potential for overcoming problems associated with the DOC model, it is often resisted: correctional agencies view it as being too autonomous; state education agencies see it as diverting scarce resources into unpopular or low priority areas; and state legislators, responding to the public's fear of crime, are sometimes reluctant to invest in so-called "rehabilitative" measures.

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Although the school district model seems promising, its effectiveness depends upon meeting some basic requirements for correctional educational delivery. The following have been identified as crucial factors in effective correctional education delivery in state adult systems:

- A systems approach to correctional education
- A fully credentialled educational administrator-in-charge
- A fully certified instructional staff
- Compliance with state and federal law and adherence to applicable national standards
- A school board/advisory committee exclusively for correctional education in the state.

Equity and Legal Issues

During the past 15 years, extensive litigation in the American correctional system has affected correctional education. Two areas of litigation that relate directly to education concern inmates' right to treatment and parity of treatment for female offenders.

Although inmates do not have an absolute right to treatment under the United States Constitution, nearly every state in the country has adopted statutes involving correctional education. These statutes tend to fall into one of three categories. The first includes those that create an absolute right to correctional education. A second category of statutes are those authorizing educational programs but leaving correctional officials the discretion to implement them. The third category includes those rare laws that establish public policy commitments in favor of unlimited access to education at all levels of instruction. Thus, although inmates do not have an inherent constitutional right to education and treatment, these statutes can be interpreted to mean that there is a broadly based, public commitment to correctional education programs.

With respect to the right to treatment, the law is relatively well developed and clear; concerning gender discrimination, however, it is still largely in flux. Although there has been much correctional education litigation related to gender discrimination, no case has been tried before the Supreme Court, and, therefore, no standard has been developed to apply in such cases. Cases tried in lower courts are evidence that federal courts are willing to ignore the "hands-off corrections" policy and intervene forcefully to protect female offenders from gender-based discrimination. Court decisions have made it quite clear that when educational or other treatment services are available to male offenders, females must be accorded parity. The disagreement among these lower court decisions grows out of the appropriate interpretation of "parity": should it be interpreted to mean "comparable to" or should it be interpreted to mean "substantially equal to?" Although the exact meaning of the term may be in dispute, decisions in lower court cases have made it quite clear that much work remains in order to bring educational conditions in women's prisons into parity with those for men.

The Learning Handicapped Adult Offender

Although the prevalence of handicaps among incarcerated juvenile offenders has been widely studied, the extent of learning handicaps among adult offenders has not yet been adequately documented. In a recent survey, to which 31 states responded, the average estimated prevalence of handicapping conditions, among adult offenders was 10 percent, with a range of 1 to 77 percent (Rutherford, Nelson, and Wolford

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1985). These figures should be regarded as conservative, however. This same survey revealed that while an average of 30 percent of incarcerated adults were in some type of correctional education program, only 1 percent were receiving special education services.

Because providing services for handicapped adult offenders is a relatively new area, there is a question of what constitutes an effective program for these individuals. Six components that are essential to the implementation of meaningful correctional special education programs have been identified by several sources. These are (1) the development of procedures for conducting functional assessments of the skills and learning needs of learning handicapped offenders; (2) the implementation of a curriculum where functional academic, social, and daily living skills are taught; (3) the existence of vocational special education in the curriculum; (4) the presence of programs and procedures for the transition of handicapped offenders between correctional programs and the community; (5) the existence of a comprehensive system for providing institutional and community services to handicapped adult offenders; and (6) the provision of special education training for correctional educators. These factors are based on the theory that effective special education, combined with appropriate transitional and aftercare services in the context of comprehensive multiagency planning and service delivery, will substantially reduce habitual patterns of criminal behavior, which typically result in recidivism and long-term incarceration.

The Role of Vocational Education in Corrections

The major purpose of vocational education programs in correctional facilities is to teach inmates vocational skills so that they can obtain work upon their release, thereby reducing recidivism. However, the public, inmates, and prison staff members have differing expectations and perceptions of vocational education. Members of the public perceive vocational programs in correctional facilities to be much the same as those in the public schools; consequently, they expect that vocational programs will turn criminals into skilled and productive workers. Inmates, on the other hand, have a more pragmatic view of vocational education. While they expect that it will provide them with some level of skill, they tend to see it as a vehicle for meeting short-term needs such as making their period of incarceration more bearable and leading to a favorable parole review. Correctional staff generally have negative perceptions of vocational education. They are likely to view it with suspicion, believing that it reduces their control over inmates and permits inmates to manipulate the system. Consequently, they expect little of it.

During the past 10 years, vocational education in corrections has focused upon rehabilitation and reintegration. Whereas much effort has been devoted to developing standards for vocational programs in correctional institutions, vocational educators have also sought to demonstrate program effectiveness in reducing recidivism. Research on vocational education in corrections is of two types: research into program needs and research into program impact on recidivism. The literature is filled with recommendations for the improvement of vocational education in prisons. Results from research related to the impact of vocational education in recidivism are mixed, however. More work is needed in this area.

Postsecondary Correctional Education

Programming at the postsecondary level is a relatively new area in correctional education. Partnerships between colleges and universities and correctional institutions have been encouraged by a combination of factors including a rapid increase in the prison population during the last 15 years, decreases in college enrollments, and the availability of federal funding for postsecondary correctional programs through the introduction of the Basic Education Opportunity Grant. The number of postsecondary programs has increased from 1 in 1953 to over 350 as of 1982. It is estimated that about 10 percent of the nation's inmate population participates in postsecondary programs.

Most programs are provided by public 2-year and 4-year colleges and universities with instruction delivered in the correctional institution either through direct instruction or some type of distance education such as correspondence study or teleconferencing. Programs are funded primarily through federal and state grant monies although other funding arrangements, such as providing inmate services in exchange for tuition, exist. Postsecondary institutions offer traditional academic education, vocational programs, adult basic education, and high school completion such as General Educational Development (GED) preparation. These offerings enable inmates to earn high school diplomas and associate or baccalaureate degrees.

Although postsecondary programming in correctional education has expanded rapidly, a number of issues surround this program area. Two of the more significant are to what extent should incarcerated individuals be given the opportunity to receive a college education and what is the long-term impact or effect of participation once incarcerated men and women are released into the community. If these issues can be addressed satisfactorily, the potential is great for continued growth and development of postsecondary programs during the next decade.

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